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# CHANGING CITIES BY DESIGN? GRAZ – ON THE WAY TO BECOMING A UNESCO CITY OF DESIGN

Karl Stocker

## *About Graz – An overview*

With almost 280 000 inhabitants,<sup>1</sup> Graz is the second largest city of the Republic of Austria, and the capital of the federal province of Styria. The greater area of Graz has a population of around 610 000 inhabitants<sup>2</sup> and is the second largest agglomeration area of Austria after the Vienna metropolitan area. A student population of around 55 000<sup>3</sup> and a higher education sector of four universities and two universities of applied sciences justify Graz' claim to be a student city. In addition, the city has a strong international connection due to its geographical position, its companies and its status as the regional capital.

Since its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999, and the European Capital of Culture in 2003, Graz has been characterized by a unique contrast and connection of old and new, tradition and innovation, handicraft and high-tech. The city hosts a wide spectrum of museums and exhibition venues, which cover the most varied thematic areas: from contemporary art to history, technology and science. Especially, the ›Kunsthhaus Graz‹, opened as a museum of modern art in 2003, stands out due to its striking architecture. Designed as a ›friendly alien‹, this exhibition hall has, in the meantime, been declared the second landmark of Graz after the Schlossberg.<sup>4</sup>

Economically speaking, the creative industries are among the most rapidly growing sectors in the metropolitan area of Graz. A study monitors this development and proves the success over the last years through its effects on added value and employment. The state of Styria is home to 3 980 creative businesses with a total of 14 190 employees contributing to a turnover of 1.5 Billion Euro (2015), with a continually positive trend.<sup>5</sup>

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1 *Magistrat Graz Präsidialabteilung Referat für Statistik: Bevölkerungsstatistik der Landeshauptstadt Graz.* Graz 2016. URL: [http://www1.graz.at/Statistik/Bev%C3%B6lkerung/Bevoelkerung\\_2015\\_final.pdf](http://www1.graz.at/Statistik/Bev%C3%B6lkerung/Bevoelkerung_2015_final.pdf).

2 *Eurostat Urban Audit: Bevölkerung am 1. Januar nach breite Altersgruppe, Geschlecht und Metropolregionen.* 7 January 2016. URL: [http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=met\\_pjanaggr3&lang=de](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=met_pjanaggr3&lang=de).

3 *Südtiroler Hochschülerinnenschaft: Über uns.* Graz 2016. URL: <http://sh-asus.tugraz.at/studieren-in-graz>.

4 *Karl Stocker: The Power of Design. A Journey through the 11 UNESCO Cities of Design.* Wien/New York 2013, p. 211–212.

5 *Creative Industries Styria: CIS Annual Report 2015.* Graz 2016.



*Ill. 1: Kunsthaus Graz. Photo: Karl Stocker*

### *The Im-Material Re-Designing of Graz – From Cultural Capital of Europe to UNESCO City of Design*

A giant stride towards today's Graz was the plan to apply for the title of Cultural Capital of Europe. In 1998 Graz was – as the only city for 2003 in Europe – appointed to become the Cultural Capital of Europe and to be the host city for this event in 2003.

With the prospect of being the Cultural Capital in the year ahead, especially, architectural projects that had been on the city's agenda for years were to be realized for the upcoming event. Outstanding examples of this urban development are the aforementioned ›Kunsthaus‹ Graz, a building designed by British architects Peter Cook and Colin Fournier (Ill. 1), and ›Le Mur Island‹ by New York artist Vito Acconci (Ill. 2). Other architectural landmarks built for 2003 are the conversion of an old industrial building into the ›Helmut List-Halle‹ – a modern concert and event arena – and the Children's Museum. In autumn 2002, a new fair arena was opened on the fair ground of the city.

Furthermore, the ›Graz 2003‹ program set itself the ambitious objective of linking the local art scene with the international community and also involving the local population to a high degree at the same time. Along with the participation of international stars like Henning Mankell or Vito Acconci,



*Ill. 2: Murinsel. Photo: Karl Stocker*

the main emphasis was on the motivation of the local scene to participate in their projects. From over 700 submissions, 108 schemes were selected to be realized during the project year. The program was positioned between the poles of high culture and innovative experiment, trying to »awaken the city's and its population's sensitivity towards others, their receptivity for new things and enthusiasm for a vibrant cultural life«. <sup>6</sup> Projects like the ›Mountain of Memories‹, which actually invited people to participate by bringing their personal memories of the history of Graz into an exhibition project, were successful in stimulating a feeling of increased team spirit all over the city for this one year of being Cultural Capital.

Graz was able to develop two of its assets. On the one hand, its strength as a tourist destination and, on the other, to build on the vibrant local and regional art scene. In doing so, the city managed to position itself as a cultural hotspot in Europe with an international reputation. Graz offers a vivid example of how ›Cultural Capitals‹ do not automatically have to be national metropolises. Graz's contribution to the Cultural Capital brand had a significant impact. One interesting aspect in this context is that following Graz's year as Cultural Capital, 21 German cities applied for Cultural Capital status in 2010, solely because of Graz's successful strategy. The above-average level

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<sup>6</sup> *Creative Industries Styria: Wir bewerben uns. Graz as »City of Design«.* Application to the UNESCO. Graz 2009.

of investment in advertising and marketing, one third of the entire budget, was one reason for the sustained success which is described in more detail below, the other was the ambitious program.

The sustainability of Graz 2003 is still obvious today. The construction of the ›Kunsthauus‹ did not only give the city a modern exhibition space of global architectural renown, but also stimulated the lasting revitalisation of a formerly neglected part of the city. Since then, a creative quarter has become established, characterized by a mixture of innovative shops and small creative firms combined with an attractive restaurant and vibrant bar scene that appeals to young people. Another architectural masterpiece of the sustained revival of the city, ›Le Mur Island‹, provides a stage and recreational area as well as a second river crossing for pedestrians between the two parts of the city. The promenade on the eastern bank was extended, with a small part of it leading directly into the city centre and even functioning as a ›city beach‹. One consequence of this new positive image of the river was that the city hosted the national championship in ›riversurfing‹ on the Mur in 2003.<sup>7</sup>

Self-positioning is a crucial advantage in the competition among cities like Graz, which are supposed to be valued as »second cities«, cities that are not internationally known capitals and therefore have not been recognized to the extent of those so far. In the case of Graz, the development took a decisive step in the direction of the ›creative industries‹. In 2006, a ›Potential Analysis of the Creative Economy in Graz and its Surroundings‹ was published – pointing out all excellent opportunities that exist for the ›creative industries‹ in Styria. The report was full of headings and catch phrases like ›creative potential in entirely new areas‹, ›boosting employment figures‹, ›a model for the economy of the future‹,<sup>8</sup> and these were a further clarion call to become active and support the development and expansion of the ›creative industries‹. The political reaction was to declare the creative industries a major strength of the Styrian economy.<sup>9</sup>

The organisational impetus of these developments is ›Creative Industries Styria GmbH‹, founded in 2007, which was set up as a networking company for the development and consolidation of the creative economy in Styria. Its mission is to coordinate, expand, develop, and position the broad field of creative services in the overall context of the Styrian economy. One of the most important goals of ›Creative Industries Styria‹ is to position Styria as a ›hotspot for creative talents‹, that is, the creation of conditions which should bring creative people from Austria, Europe and all around the world to our region.<sup>10</sup>

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7 Ibid., p. 34 f.; Michael Bodner: Place Branding and the Creative Economy. Graz as a UNESCO City of Design. Graz 2013.

8 *Creative Industries Styria: Graz UNESCO City of Design Report 2011–13*. Graz 2014, p. 6.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

›Creative Industries Styria‹ initiated a broad spectrum of activities in its function as an application manager for the UNESCO City of Design Network of 2008, to sound out expectations and resistance and above all to enter into an active communication process with local stakeholders. The chances and opportunities arising from a UNESCO City of Design application were all weighed up in numerous talks and discussion rounds with people from the creative industries. The ›City of Design Board‹ – an advisory expert body – was set up to provide strategic support for the many activities in the context of the UNESCO City of Design. A first draft of the application was submitted to the UNESCO in Paris in July 2009 and, following a number of revisions, it was made available for expert appraisal in June 2010. What made the Graz application so special was the open and public manner in which the entire application process was handled. The ›public‹ aspect was meant to keep the people of the city informed about each successive procedural step. The application itself was published as a magazine achieving a broad readership and reaching the aim of bringing in as many participants as possible.

Other very good reasons prompted this effort too: ›design‹ is a relatively vague term in German and not something to be presented to people without further explanation. A contemporary understanding of design does not focus on a finishing touch or surface flourishes, but on the provision of form and shape in a fully integrated process through all the development phases of products and services for our society. It is precisely in this wider dimension of design – a context not immediately apparent to many people – that tangible design policy measures need to be established and communicated. Design and the creative industries were emerging as issues of major significance throughout this period and as subjects for thoroughly controversial discussions. A vitally important objective has been achieved as a result: that of establishing design as a general concern for society.<sup>11</sup>

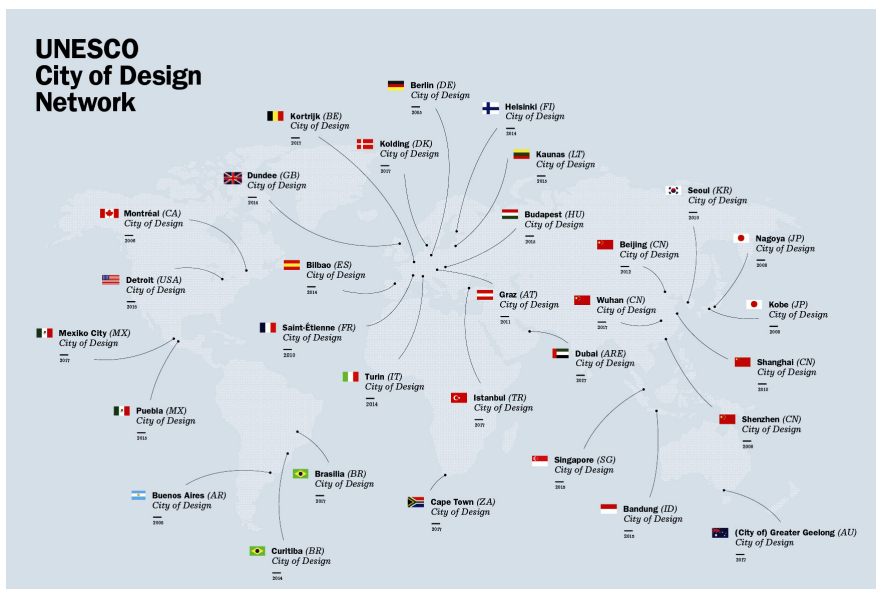
On March 14<sup>th</sup> of 2011 Graz was accepted as a City of Design in the UNESCO Creative City Network. Therefore, Graz found itself in very prominent company with Beijing, Berlin, Buenos Aires, Kobe, Montreal, Nagoya, Saint-Etienne, Seoul, Shanghai and Shenzhen. In order to be accepted by the UNESCO as a City of Design, a city has to possess an established design industry, a developed cultural scene with adequate buildings, design schools and design research centres, and an active creative scene. The city must also command expertise in the implementation of design-oriented trade shows, events and exhibitions. Furthermore, it has to offer local designers and city planners the opportunity to take advantage of local materials and urban/natural conditions. Design-oriented creative industries such as architecture, interior design, fashion, textiles, jewellery and accessories, interactive design, urban design or sustainable design must be present in the city. UNESCO has declared that all of the aforementioned cities meet these requirements.<sup>12</sup> In

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11 Ibid., p. 6–7.

12 Stocker, as in fn. 4, p. 7–8.





Ill. 3: The UNESCO City of Design Network December 2017. Map: CIS Community

the meantime the network has grown up to 31 UNESCO Cities of Design, which are quite a lot (Ill. 3).

### *Graz UNESCO City of Design – Work in progress*

The ›Candidate City‹ Graz actively used the period up to the decision was made to further develop and establish its positioning as a city of design. One thing was clear to everyone involved:

»Even if acceptance in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network was not forthcoming, the focus on design and the creative industries would on no account be abandoned. This period was used for example for the intensive work on the development of the Designmonat Graz, which since its beginnings in 2009 has firmly established itself as a regular event for domestic and international creative designers.«<sup>13</sup>

This kind of a design festival has succeeded in bundling and condensing all the energy of the creative industries within a single four-week period. It followed the objective of establishing the broadest possible awareness for

13 *Creative Industries Styria*, as in fn. 8, p. 7.



*Ill. 4: Opening of Designmonth 2014. Photo: Karl Stocker*

the significance of design as an important economic success factor and thus making this concern clearly visible to everybody (Ill. 4).<sup>14</sup>

Most importantly, the Designmonat festival is conceived as an image and awareness campaign in order to »take design from the edge of the collective consciousness, directly into the centre of public awareness«. Every year the Designmonat festival organizes a comprehensive program – in fact not only in Graz, but also all over Styria – involving a variety of activities and a broad spectrum of design fields such as architecture, product design, furniture design, information design, media design, exhibition design, music and fashion.<sup>15</sup>

»Of course, the Designmonat Graz has an international reach. Design as a vital business issue for Graz takes its place in a thoroughly appealing business environment: Local companies show enormous innovative strength, while the city has a high density of universities and institutions of higher education. All this is linked to creative industries with a substantial share in the gross value added – an altogether remarkable starting point for achieving powerful international reputation. International networking was thus an important priority for

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> *Stocker*, as in fn. 4, p. 212–213.



Graz on this solid foundation long before the repositioning as a ›City of Design‹. Graz as a seat of learning and a city with a very high student population has long exerted a strong pull throughout southern and south-eastern Europe. It was thus no surprise that the networking activities thrust ahead and made great advances in this region, too, during the UNESCO City of Design application process. Relationships were sought with existing members of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, and also to other metropolises with a flourishing design scene. Maintaining contact with those partners does not only allow to benchmark the own position, but will also provide incentives on how to establish global design on a local basis, thus creating fruitful relations with the economy as a whole.«<sup>16</sup>

Four UNESCO Cities of Design have so far been directly represented in Graz: Buenos Aires in 2012, Nagoya in 2013, Saint-Étienne in 2014 and Montreal in 2015. Saint-Étienne has been a UNESCO City of Design since 2011 and among other activities it was the destination for a Creative Industries Styria Network visit in October 2013; also, the City of Graz participated in the Saint-Étienne Design Biennale 2013.

Furthermore, numerous projects have been initiated in order to make the issue of design visible to everyone in the city: For example the ›Jakominiviertel‹, a city district project, has attracted great international attention by the settling and establishing of creative industries in what had previously been a socio-economically disadvantaged area.<sup>17</sup>

With its theme of ›Ready-Steady-Go‹, the ›Jakominiviertel‹ pilot project kicked off with the distinctive ›Red Running Track‹ in 2010 (Ill. 5). Over the next four years, the project picked up speed, with the varied mix of design firms, fashion shops, architectural offices, advertising agencies, and traditional workshops adding momentum to the district. Up to forty new companies have set up business in the ›Jakominiviertel‹. Altogether, the district gathers 93 companies along the running track, with a total of around 140 jobs. Twenty-eight of these companies are in the creative sector, 59 percent of the companies in the ›Jakominiviertel‹ district are one-person companies. The great creative potential and the resulting enhancement of the ›Jakominiviertel‹ have resulted in lasting stimulation. With the impetus from the pilot project, the city has proven that it is possible to generate added value in the district which again stimulates dynamic development and results in a win-win situation for all.<sup>18</sup>

The ›City Furnishing‹ projects try to induce communication processes into the city. In her 2012 project

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16 *Creative Industries Styria*, as in fn. 8, p. 7.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., p. 59.



Ill. 5: *The Red Running Track*. Photo: CIS Community

»DESIGN from GRAZ«, Johanna Prechtl placed communication design at centre stage. The furniture itself reduced communication down to the simplest form of letters. Their huge size allowed them to be used as places to sit or lie down on as well as a means of transporting information. It is exactly this aspect which made the project so versatile. The choice of a particular letter can connect the seating to its environment, an aspect that can be enhanced by printing additional information onto the letters.«<sup>19</sup>

The aim of the program ›Designers in Residence«, which started in 2009, is to give enterprises more opportunities to use modern design. The program

»connects enterprises and designers in order to establish future co-operations for the benefit of both. ›Designers in Residence« aims at enterprises which may nonetheless be interested to assert themselves on the market by means of professional design. Designers get the opportunity to work directly for the enterprise and are given 4–8 weeks to approach solutions. ›Designers in Residence« is not about a competition, it is about innovative ways of networking between economy and creative industry. Both get to know the premises of the other, their way of thinking and acting. The partnership is voluntary and clearly out-

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 19.



Ill. 6: ›Nothing Stops Detroit‹. Designmonth Exhibition by master students Janine Hugsam, Eva Stern and Patricia Wess. Photo: Eva Stern

lined, ideally leading up to a long-term cooperation. [...] The participation rules are simple: enterprises interested in the project declare to take part in the Designers in Residence project. A clearly defined description of general conditions and tasks is shaped. Based on this description the designers can apply for participation.«<sup>20</sup>

A project which I personally find very noteworthy is ›Experiencing Economy – Made in Styria‹, which tries to offer interested people an insight into Styrian companies. More than 50 businesses have taken part in the flagship project and offered so-called adventure tours through their firms. All of the businesses taking part in this project are involved in a long-term partnership, and at the same time have the opportunity to present their operations to the public and make economics comprehensible in a tangible way. This not only requires a strong commitment on the part of business management, but also on the part of the employees who are actively involved in the project. These businesses in turn provide a creative and vivid realization of the adventure tours, which last about one hour, and also give advisory support

20 *Creative Industries Styria: Designer in Residence*. 7 January 2016. URL: <http://www.cis.at/de/archiv/cis-projects/designer-in-residence-en>.



*Ill. 7: Since 2010 at the FH Lecture Days international initiatives and designers are presenting their work at the Designmonat Graz. 2015 ›Friends International‹ from Cambodia explained their social entrepreneur business model. Photo: CIS Community*

to the companies. Since 2009 more than 1.5 million visitors have seen the companies of ›Experience Economy‹.<sup>21</sup>

The ›Styrian Designforum‹ was established at the Kunsthau Graz in 2010, and in 2015 it moved to a new location in the centre of the city. It is one of three design forums throughout Austria, which are to give designers and design projects the opportunity to reach a broad public. This, in turn, will pave the way for a centre of urban dialogue, competence and communication that addresses all aspects of design in its many different forms. Between 2010 and 2015, 312 000 people have visited the various events and exhibitions which usually focus on and present product and industrial design.<sup>22</sup>

As already mentioned above, one essential presupposition for a city to become UNESCO City of Design is the existence of training opportunities for young people. The university I work for, ›FH JOANNEUM‹, therefore, has not only actively participated in the application process from the very beginning, but has also taken part in various activities of the Creative Industries to embed the design spirit in the hearts and heads of the people living in Graz.

21 *Creative Industries Styria*, as in fn. 5, p. 19.

22 *Creative Industries Styria*, as in fn. 8, p. 7; *Creative Industries Styria*, as in fn. 5, p. 22.

As head of two design degree programs at the University of Applied Sciences, ›FH JOANNEUM‹, I am, naturally, interested in further expanding our international networks in order to offer employees and students the opportunity to broaden their horizons through stays abroad. I have, therefore, gladly accepted the invitation to become a member of the advisory board of Creative Industries Styria. Since then, the initiation and execution of concrete projects with different partner cities have increasingly become part of my agenda. The long-term goal of our degree programs is the expansion of our network of partner universities by adding universities from all the cities in the City of Design Network. The first partnership contracts have already been completed with the Saint-Étienne Higher School of Art and Design, the University of Shenzhen, the University of Nagoya and the Kobe Design University. Two intensive projects have already been carried out: Starting in autumn 2012, in cooperation with students of the University of Nagoya, students of our ›Exhibition Design‹ Master's program developed an exhibition on the city of Nagoya, which was presented to the public in May 2013 during the Designmonat Graz festival. One year later we carried out a similar project with our partner university in Saint-Étienne. The result, an exhibition titled ›Design Saint Etienne meets Graz‹, was not only shown in Graz, but later on also in Saint-Étienne. In October 2014, the Master students visited Montreal, and in cooperation with students of the University of Quebec at Montreal (UQAM) they developed the exhibition ›Montreal Design in Graz‹, which was presented at the Designmonat 2015. One year later, the master degree students went to Detroit, which at that time was on application status as UNESCO City of Design. The result of this visit was an exhibition called ›Nothing Stops Detroit‹ which was shown at Designmonat 2016 (Ill. 6 and 7).

### *Challenges*

Immediately after the appointment of Graz as UNESCO City of Design,

»a Key Account Management office was [...] installed in the Department of Economic Affairs and Tourism Development. This strategically important office should serve as an interface and information hub with the aim of familiarising all municipal administration units with the subject of City of Design. Among its tasks are regular meetings with the heads of all twenty-eight municipal departments. In addition to communicating information, the aim was also to identify starting points and potential projects in order to ensure active involvement of the departments and to firmly introduce and also maintain an inclusive, modern concept of design in the long term.«<sup>23</sup>

However well-intentioned that may have been, the realisation proved to be problematic. On the one hand, the people designated to fulfil these tasks permanently changed and on the other hand, most heads of municipal de-

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<sup>23</sup> *Creative Industries Styria*, as in fn. 8, p.7.



partments thought that the City of Design would not fall into their area of responsibility. Hence, it was, unfortunately, impossible to encourage them to let the idea of the City of Design come alive in their departments.

In autumn 2013, the City of Graz, Department of Economic Affairs and Tourism Development, itself moved the UNESCO City of Design issue even more firmly into the centre of attention by establishing a designated administrative office: ›Creative City Management‹. Hopefully, this will have more impact on the design tasks now than it has had before.

Generally speaking, it should be stated that local politicians indeed like to open events such as the Designmonat, but in the context of the current cost cuts hardly anybody feels committed to really supporting the City of Design by providing adequate financial resources. Correspondingly, the approval of the City of Design by urban policy mostly remains a lip service. Thus, we encounter the rather disconcerting situation in Graz that the city is in fact a UNESCO City of Design, but the activities concerning this matter are mainly financed by the Province of Styria's Economics Department.

### *Prospects and chances*

Still, being part of the UNESCO City of Design Network brings attractive opportunities for the city of Graz. According to UNESCO, the goal of the network is the development of international cooperations between the designated cities in order to stimulate »joint development partnerships in line with UNESCO's global priorities of ›culture and development‹, and ›sustainable development‹.«.<sup>24</sup> The partner cities should exchange their experiences, ideas and best practice examples, mutually promote one another, ›live‹ the most varied forms of collaborations and projects, organize competitions and invite the public to presentations and exhibitions. Since the network was only established nine years ago, and Graz has only been a member for three years, there is still a lot of potential for development here. As different as the approaches of the individual cities are from each other in terms of investment into design, and as varied as the definitions of design are, it still makes sense to learn from the approaches and experiences of the partner cities and to cooperate with each other.

However, Graz is still lagging well behind, compared to other Cities of Design: thoughts on the ›City of Design‹ need to be better anchored in the ›city's consciousness‹, and there is ground to be made up in this regard. It would also be advisable to create an organizational and geographical grouping of design-related activities, similar to those installed so exemplarily in our partner city Saint-Etienne: the positioning of the ›Cité du Design‹ on the premises of a former weapons factory.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



The tense relationship between the design scene and independent artists can be regarded as a problem not only typical for Graz. However, it seems to have taken a certain manifestation here in Graz. Especially, since the current regional minister for Economic Affairs – who is politically responsible for design affairs – is also in charge of cultural affairs, the art scene constantly fears a dry-up of their subsidies. The fact that arts and culture are incomparably highly subsidised in Austria make the fear of the free art scene quite comprehensible. Also in that case, it might be worth taking a look at the UNESCO partner city of Kobe: The ›Design Creative Center Kobe‹, opened in November 2012. It tries in an exemplary way to give more space to both artistic as well as design-related activities. The creation of synergies as realised in Kobe would definitely be desirable for the creative scene in Graz as well in order to provoke a mutual stimulation of both artists and designers.

In general, it would also be highly desirable for me as a design activist for design itself to be made more visible throughout the city. Compared to cities such as Montreal or Saint-Etienne, the municipal information systems and also the furnishing of the city would have to be further developed. Projects like the ›City Furnishing‹ have remained one-off campaigns up to now. However, they should rather be developed into an integrated overall concept.

Concerning the city branding, it would make sense to outwardly intertwine the contents of the promotion in a better way. While a focus is currently rather laid on the promotion of the UNESCO Heritage City by public authorities, measures should be taken in this respect to synergetically also include the UNESCO City of Design since one particular unique selling point of Graz is indeed the fact that the city has not only been awarded the title of World Heritage Site, but also that of City of Design by the UNESCO.



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